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The epileptic seizure and the myth of Hyakinthos

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ABSTRACT

Epilepsy is, apart from sleep, the essential human experience of what looks like a violent, dramatic but transient form of death, a death a person can recover from. This makes epilepsy interesting in Indo-European tradition where rebirth in its various forms is an established concept. This paper interprets an illumination of the Middle Ages and comments on the promise made to a fallen person with epilepsy through the myth of Hyakinthos. Hyakinthos, Apollo's friend, died in a friendly competition and was reborn from his own blood in the form of a flower that bears his name.

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1. Introduction

The original fruit of the tree of knowledge is mans knowledge about his end, his death. The Gods are immortal and know it. The animal is mortal but ignores it. Only man does not fit into this serene distinction and has to rely on cultural creation to deal with this frightening knowledge.

In Greek mythology, hypnos (sleep) is the younger brother of thanatos (death). Apart from sleep, which Aristotle considered “in a way... as an epilepsy”,¹ the epileptic generalized seizure, with its unresponsive state following a violent scream and convulsions, is the essential human experience of what looks much like a transient form of death. In Christian painting this has been linked to the fate of Christ, with his passion and resurrection.²

Here we comment on an illumination which figures in the French translation of a sort of British encyclopaedia of the Middle Ages in which a fallen person with epilepsy is represented together with Hyacinths,³ deeply rooted in Greek mythology.

2. The epileptic young man, the hyacinths and the myth of rebirth

A Franciscan monk, called Bartholomew the English, wrote in the XVth century the quite fundamental *Book of Characteristics*, a sum of the knowledge of his time, which the French king Charles the Vth had translated from Latin to French.⁴ The chapter on the

“*Serious scourge the physicians call Epilencie*” contains this miniature (Fig. 1). We see a young man, having fallen to the ground during his seizure. A hat next to him indicates the violence of the fall. In the forefront there are two flowers, two hyacinths: two layers of symbolic meaning. Nature tends to fuse with culture in our Occidental tradition to put flowers on tombs. This habit seems so “natural” that we may forget the symbol it bears. But obviously, in that case nature is charged with symbolic meaning. Flowers radiate through their beauty, colour and their function in fertilization the idea of Eros, of new and blooming life. Not by chance does a young bride in the Western world carry a bouquet of flowers when she steps forward for her wedding. The word “defloration” is another unmistakable hint for the sexual symbolism of flowers. Placed on tombs, fresh flowers express our will to prefer life to death, Eros to Thanatos and as long as we replace fading flowers by new, blooming ones, Eros and Life will win, the dead will live on in our mind. In ancient Greece, blooming springflowers indicate that Persephone (vide infra) has been freed from the underworld, allowed to turn back on earth and a new season, new life begins.

As to the more specific meaning of this miniature, we have to notice that the two impressive flowers on the foreground are hyacinths! The choice of those flowers is undoubtedly symbolic⁵; in Greek mythology the young Hyakinthos is accidentally hit by the disk his friend Apollo throws during a competition.⁶ (An alternate version tells that Zephyros also loved the young Hyakinthos and out of jealousy deflected Apollos disc against the head of his lover. In this erotically tinted version it is jealousy that causes Hyakinthos' death.) He enters the cycle of death and rebirth since he undergoes a metamorphosis by being reborn from

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Fig. 1. MS FR 22532 Fol 103 v – Bibliothèque Nationale Française, Paris “*Livre des Caractéristiques*”, by Bartholomé l’Anglais, miniature of the chapter “*Hault Mal que les phisiciens appellent « Epilencie »*”. The miniature illustrates the following, french text: « L’évangile raconte que le Christ guérit un homme qui, lorsqu’il était en crise, tombait à terre et écumait par la bouche. Cette maladie est communément appelée le haut mal, et les médecins l’appellent l’épilepsie. Jadis, on la nommait « colère de Dieu »⁴ (the Book of the Gospels tells that Christ healed a man who, being seized, fell to earth and had foam on his mouth. This disease is commonly called “le haut mal” and physicians call it epilepsy. Once it had been called “Divine wrath”).

his own blood in the form of the flower hyacinth (the ancient, dark hyacinth, *Iris germanica* or *foetidissima*, is different from what we call now Hyacinths) (Fig. 2). Their Y-shaped leaves evoke the first letter of the name Hyakinthos⁶. Another myth suggests that the shape of the leaf resembles the letters A and I, i.e. the sound of the outcry of Apollo mourning. This dark coloured flower was associated with death in ancient Greece, placed on tombs and also used to weave crowns that were carried on the occasion of the Demeter ceremony by boys to Hermione. In fact, the myth of Hyakinthos seems to have its deeper roots in the ancient, pre-hellenic, myth of Demeter. Demeter (lit. «Earth Mother») is known as the Goddess of fertility and “the bringer of seasons”. When her daughter Persephone is abducted – while gathering various flowers, among them hyacinths!⁶ – by Hades to the underworld, she negotiates that her child is allowed to turn back to earth every year for one season – allowing the earth to bloom again. Thanks to Demeter, Persephone, forced to the realm of death, nevertheless always returns to earth. Therefore Demeter was a frequent character on sarcophaguses. The 3-day ceremony “Hyacinthia” was celebrated near Sparta at Amyklai, a town founded by Amyklas, the father of Hyakinthos. This ceremony in honour of Hyakinthos seems to have been a symbolic representation of the cycle of end and new beginning of nature.⁶

3. Conclusion

This small miniature echoes a profound tradition. In the myth of Hyakinthos we find the idea of succession, of fertility, death and



Fig. 2. *Iris germanica* or *foetidissima*.

rebirth, the idea of a cycle, one of the basic concepts of Indo-European culture.

The monk who produced this miniature is a visionary and expresses through the Hyacinth the belief and the hope that the ictal loss of consciousness, the apparent loss of life in what we call post-ictal coma, will be transient and that life will start again

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